

Cross and swastika

by [Kevin Madigan](#) in the [March 1, 2000](#) issue

*Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust*, edited by Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel

On the cover of this stunning and disquieting collection of essays is an image that, however familiar, never loses its power to jolt. On the steps of a church stands Ludwig Müller, draped in ecclesiastical robes, a crucifix dangling from his neck. He is surrounded by a group of storm troopers and, like them, he has his right arm raised in homage to the Führer. He is thanking Hitler for elevating him to the coveted position of "Reich Bishop."

In Germany in the 1930s so outrageous a synthesis of Nazi gesture and ecclesiastical symbolism was hardly unique, or even uncommon. In church on Sunday morning, a swastika often rested on the altar, right next to the cross. The arms of pastors and parishioners were banded by swastikas as they processed, bearing banners of crosses.

*Kreuz und Hakenkreuz*: it's hard today to imagine two symbols more inimical to one another. But in Third Reich Germany only a rare Christian found the juxtaposition of cross and swastika obscene. Very few disciples of Christ found in it an ominous augury for their Jewish neighbors, a troubling sign of coming betrayal. Very few protested when they heard the glass of boycotted stores shattering, or watched synagogues go up in flames on *Kristallnacht*, or saw an "Aryan" neighbor prevent a Jewish boy from buying a loaf of bread, or observed their dispossessed Jewish neighbors boarding trains for points East and then heard incredible rumors, perhaps even saw photographs, of mass annihilation in Poland and the Soviet Union. Ninety-five percent of Germany's citizens were baptized Christians. But almost no one said anything at all.

Why? Part of the reason, as Robert P. Ericksen demonstrates so convincingly in the first of these essays, has to do with the sort of training many pastors received and the sorts of ideas they then conveyed to their parishioners. Seminarians attending distinguished universities like those at Erlangen, Göttingen and Tübingen would

have heard theologians of the stature of Paul Althaus, Emmanuel Hirsch and Gerhard Kittel denouncing Jews as a menace to Western society. Jews were to be resisted by the twin bulwarks of Christianity and the providentially ordained government of Adolf Hitler. (Althaus heralded the ascendancy of the National Socialists to power as "a gift and miracle of God.")

The same sort of thing could be heard in Catholic circles, as Michael Lukens shows in his fine essay on the influential theologian Joseph Lortz. Like the Nazis, Lortz (trained in medieval thought) was deeply opposed to many modern ideas that had their roots in the Enlightenment. He saw the Nazi government as a defense against communism. In fact, his lectures and publications, which Nazi officials were quick to exploit, were designed to show the compatibility of Nazi ideology and policy with Catholic teaching. A generation of Germany's religious leaders learned enthusiasm for Hitler and contempt for the Jews from such men. Is it any surprise that so few objected to Nazi policy, or that the religious training of ordinary Christians proved so weak an impediment to participating in genocide?

As Doris L. Bergen and Susannah Heschel show in their fascinating essays, the largely Protestant "German Christian" movement's relationship to Hitler and to anti-Jewish policy ought, in fact, to be measured in terms not of resistance but of enthusiasm. If German postwar historiography has presented German Christians as victims of the Nazi Party, Bergen and Heschel prove decisively that the movement was doing everything possible to ingratiate itself with the regime and to participate in its political and cultural objectives of de-Judaizing German society. Indeed, as Heschel points out, the aim of the German Christian movement was to create a *Judenrein* ("Jew-free") church, even as the Nazis energetically pursued their lethal aim of creating a *Judenrein* Reich. Theirs was, as Bergen puts it, "an ecclesiology defined by race." They attempted to synthesize Nazi ideology and the scriptural, catechetical and hymnal traditions of Protestantism.

Their success should not be underestimated. Though "only" 600,000 strong, the German Christians captured the deanships of virtually all of the Protestant theological faculties and many key local and national church-government posts. Heschel points out that they dominated certain theological faculties and curricula, including that of Jena, which aspired to become (in the words of one of its theology professors) "a stronghold of National Socialism." Jena's theological faculty was instrumental in creating and running an academic "de-Judaization" institute in nearby Eisenach ("The Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on

the Church Life of the German Volk"), which produced popular de-Judaized versions of the New Testament, hymnals and catechisms, as well as screeds denying the canonicity of the Old Testament and books "proving" that, far from being Jewish, Jesus was a Galilean, probably an Aryan. His greatest enemy? The loathsome Jews.

Thus, as the Final Solution was being enacted in the early 1940s, an "ecclesiastical final solution" (Bergen's term) was occurring within the churches. All of this helped, as Heschel puts it, "to effect the Nazification of Germany theologically" and to shape a theologically sanctioned view of Jews, Judaism and "Jewishness" that made first the social deaths of Jewish people and then their extermination less likely to be viewed with outrage or even concern.

Shelley Barnaowski's essay demythologizes the notion that the Confessing Church, founded, as is well known, in opposition to the German Christian movement, was vigorously opposed to the Third Reich and its anti-Semitic presuppositions and policies. If the Confessing Church was indeed "the most prominent source of Protestant opposition to the Third Reich," what it opposed was the politicization of the church by Nazi ideology. It never questioned the Third Reich's political legitimacy. Even more important, its "instinctive anti-Semitism," which it shared with the German Christians, prevented it from protesting the brutal Aryanization of society. Members of the Confessing Church only protested when Aryanization threatened the integrity and independence of the evangelical church.

Kenneth Barnes's rich essay on Dietrich Bonhoeffer demonstrates that Bonhoeffer ultimately moved beyond the Confessing Church's concern for institutional integrity and autonomy and, of course, died for his call to resistance. But as Barnes points out, even Bonhoeffer could speak unreflectively, early in his career, of the linkage between supposed complicity in deicide and Jewish suffering. He also could write that there would be a Jewish problem until the Jews converted to the True Faith.

In 1964, shortly after Rolf Hochhuth had created an international sensation with his play *The Deputy*, which presented Pope Pius XII as virtually criminally complicit with the Nazis, Guenther Lewy published an influential essay on Pius. The essay, reprinted here, presents a damning picture of the passivity of the German Catholic Church in the Holocaust, as well as its complicity with the Nazi genocide by supplying genealogical records that enabled the regime to determine who was fully Aryan. He also presents Pius not merely as timid but as one who "did not view the plight of the Jews with a real sense of urgency and moral outrage," one who could

maintain his serene silence while, a couple of hundred yards away from the Vatican, more than 1,500 Roman Jews were being rounded up for deportation to Auschwitz.

In June of 1963, Abraham Joshua Heschel sent a telegram to John F. Kennedy. In view of the long oppression of "Negroes" in America, Heschel proposed that the time had come for "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity" in freeing America from racism. Heschel knew all about discrimination from painful personal experience. He was one of the few Jews who survived Hitler's plan; his three sisters and many other relatives were less fortunate. He guessed what silence on the part of religious institutions would mean for minorities in America because he knew what it had meant for Jews in Europe. This book, however melancholy and even devastating its findings and effects, achieves intellectual as well as moral grandeur. Indeed, it's hard to think of any book more important for Christians to read in preparation for the grandeur and audacity that undoubtedly will be required of the churches during the next 100 years.